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SUBJECT: SERPA ON 2006 ELECTIONS, BILATERAL RELATIONS, AND VENEZUELA

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reasons: 1.4 B & D.

1. (C) Summary: Ambassador and Liberal Party Presidential nominee hopeful Horacio Serpa discussed national politics at breakfast on July 12. Serpa said under a reelection scenario, President Uribe would win easily. He hoped for a grand left/center-left coalition against Uribe in the first round, but was uncertain if Liberal Party President Cesar Gaviria was open to such an option. On extradition, Serpa supported it for "pure drug traffickers" but believed a cut-out was needed for paramilitaries who trafficked drugs solely to finance activities to combat the guerrillas. On U.S. assistance to Colombia, Serpa said more of the total should be focused on socioeconomic development, citing a lack of economic opportunity for the middle class. Describing his most recent meeting with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Serpa expressed concern over Chavez's control of all institutions in Venezuela and his sense of conviction of purpose. On July 17, Serpa announced his formal run for the Party's Presidential nomination. End Summary.

2006 Presidential Election

2. (C) Ambassador met for two hours over breakfast on July 12 with 2002 Officialist Liberal Party (PLC) Presidential nominee and former OAS Ambassador Horacio Serpa. Serpa described the political scene as full of uncertainty as everyone waited for a decision from the Constitutional Court over whether President Uribe could run for reelection. He was strongly against reelection in Colombia (for Uribe or any other individual) based on the weakness of institutions and potential for dictatorial rule. Serpa also noted that Colombia's 1991 Constituent Assembly and resulting Constitution were strongly anti-reelection. Serpa believed the Constitutional Court could conceivably rule to permit reelection but not consecutively, effectively shutting Uribe out of the 2006 contest. If Uribe is permitted to run, according to Serpa, he would win. The only hope, albeit a slim one, for the opposition, he said, was for left and center-left forces -- including the PLC and the Polo Democratico (PDI) -- to unite in a coalition for the first round of Presidential voting in May. (Note: Colombia's system includes a second round run-off if no candidate receives 50 percent in the first round. End Note.) He hoped such a coalition could mobilize "social groups," including teachers and retirees, whom he termed as generally anti-Uribe.

Extradition

4. (C) Ambassador inquired as to Serpa's views on extradition. Serpa expressed strong support for extradition of major drug traffickers to the U.S. He suggested the need for an exception, however, for paramilitaries who trafficked in order to finance AUC actions to combat the FARC and ELN. Serpa did, however, stress that individuals such as "Don Berna" should remain in the extradition pipeline.

U.S. Assistance

5. (C) Ambassador solicited Serpa's view on U.S. assistance to Colombia and its efficacy. Serpa agreed on the need to focus assistance on counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and socioeconomic activity. He believed, however, that the socioeconomic side needed to be much larger. Turning to Uribe's Democratic Security Policy, Serpa agreed it had been successful, but nevertheless cautioned that the only way to solve the illegal armed group (IAG) problem in Colombia was to provide lower and middle classes with economic and educational opportunities.

Chavez and Morales

6. (C) Serpa stated he last met with Hugo Chavez two months ago in Caracas. He expressed concern over the extent to which Chavez has exerted control over all areas of government in the country. He noted that Chavez continues to exude confidence in his plan of action. Addressing rumors that

Chavez planned to fund leftist political campaigns in Colombia, Serpa dismissed the possibility, stating that in the end campaigns in Colombia were cheap in relative terms. In addition, the Colombian public would react very negatively to any evidence of such financing. Regarding Evo Morales in Bolivia, Serpa described him as evasive and "strange." Serpa indicated it is difficult to dialogue with Morales, who is reluctant to look anyone in the eyes in a conversation.

WOOD